

Ruth Ellen Elinski has been selected as the 2015 Coconino First Things First Champion for Young Children.

The award is given to local champions who actively volunteer their time to raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Champions spend a significant amount of time volunteering with FTF and building public awareness about the importance of early childhood issues.



The awareness-raising efforts Elinski has demonstrated include:

- Served on a First Things First volunteer committee.
- Regularly hosted informational tables to raise awareness about resources to families and providers
- Organized and supported the early childhood fairs across the regions.
- Gave presentations to college students on ways to message and advocate for early learning.
- Wrote letters to the editor about the importance of supporting early education professionals.
- Voiced her experiences as a mom to raise awareness with local leaders about the importance of investing in early childhood.

We recently caught up with Elinski, who works as the Executive Director of the Coconino Coalition for Children and Youth.

Question: Why do you feel Early Childhood development and health is so important?

Answer: Getting children off to the right start only ensures their success from childhood through adulthood. It just makes sense to invest in children at the earliest stages possible, which ensures better outcomes in the long run. We all want healthy, productive, thriving communities and this is achieved through early investment.

Q: What caused you to get involved in efforts to increase public awareness in early childhood issues?

A: I am always moved by the work of economists around the globe who continue to show the relationship between investment in early childhood education and the long term economic benefits to communities. It was one of those presentations that showed investing \$1 today in early childhood saves \$16 in the long run. That is huge and the numbers don't lie. I am moved to educate and inform the policy makers and decision makers about this savings. It matters.

Q: Why do you feel building awareness in early childhood and developmental health is so important for families and communities?

A: Giving young children the building blocks early, will give them the tools to learn, engage, and be successful throughout life, from kindergarten, through school and to college or career, and on as parents and contributing members of the community. All people deserve the same opportunities to be

successful. If we give all children the same start, access to healthy, active, creative learning opportunities, there will be better outcomes for all.

Q: How have you seen awareness for the early years change in your community?

A: I think this is a long term education campaign. Though I believe we have made some steps forward, we have a long way to go. We need to really make changes in policy. That will make the difference. Yes, I think people are more aware, I think parents are more aware, teachers are more aware, but we must infiltrate the message to those that make the policy decisions. When I say policy, I mean full-day kindergarten, affordable, accessible, quality child care programs, parent support and education services, and creative learning opportunities for all, not just some of our young children.

Q: How do you suggest other people in your community get involved?

A: Engaging around this critical issue is as easy as thanking early childhood professionals for their hard work and dedication to young children, writing a letter to the editor or to your local representatives that expresses the importance of early childhood educational opportunities, telling leaders and those around you that living in a community with early childhood educational opportunities is a priority for you and for the community overall, or finding out more about what quality programs look like and how we can bring such quality to our communities here in northern Arizona. Young children do not have a voice when it comes to these big decisions. Their healthy development, their success, their productivity, their ability, and what they can and should contribute to this world is all at stake. We must be their voice.

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About First Things First – First Things First is a voter-created, statewide organization that funds early education and health programs to help kids be successful once they enter kindergarten. Decisions about how those funds are spent are made by local councils staffed by community volunteers. To learn more, visit azftf.gov.